DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 448 662 HE 033 671

AUTHOR	Wegner, Gregory R.
TITLE	Strategic Community Partnerships. Exemplars.
INSTITUTION	Knight Collaborative, Akron, OH.; Institute for Research on Higher Education, Philadelphia, PA.
SPONS AGENCY	John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Miami, FL.
PUB DATE	2000-11-00
NOTE	13p.; Companion to "Policy Perspectives," a serial published by the Knight Higher Education Collaborative; see HE 033 670.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*College Role; *Community Programs; Cooperation; Higher Education; *Partnerships in Education; *School Community Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Strategic Behavior

ABSTRACT

In January 2000, the Knight Collaborative for Higher Education began an intensive 4-month engagement with 4 higher education institutions focusing on the development of strategic community partnerships. The four institutions were: (1) Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania; (2) Michigan State University; (3) the State University of New York, College at Geneseo; and (4) Washington and Jefferson College, Washington, Pennsylvania. The initiative provided opportunities for leadership teams from these four institutions to compare notes, define the principles of community engagement, and develop action plans and criteria for evaluating success. All four institutions were motivated by the understanding that their own futures were directly dependent on the social and economic livelihoods of their own regions. Their discussions focused on defining the principles of partnership, engaging the community, building internal commitment, and sustaining the effort. They compared their experiences in partnership efforts and worked on ways to establish landmarks toward progress. In each case, the institution recognized that community partnerships provide an avenue for teaching by example in addition to precept, conveying the value of community and civic participation on the basis of what they do as well as what they say. (SLD)

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ED 448 662

PERSPECTIVES
November 2000

Exemplars

Strategic Community Partnerships

The Problem: *Three colleges and a university, deeply rooted in their respective communities, recognize how closely their own futures are linked to the well-being of their surrounding regions.*

The Solution: *Engage in strategic community partnerships to ensure the continued vitality of each community, region, and institution.*

In January 2000, the Knight Collaborative convened an intensive, four-month Engagement with four higher education institutions focusing on the development of strategic community partnerships. While these institutions differ from one another in both character and circumstance, they found themselves drawn together by a common set of challenges. Each had come to see that, in a fundamental sense, its own future vitality was linked to that of its local or regional community. In an age of increasing global awareness and interaction, each of these institutions had become convinced that a failure to develop more substantive links with its geographic community could negatively impact both its market position and its effectiveness in fulfilling a mission of education, research, and service. As such, each had committed itself to cultivating a more meaningful set of relationships with its own community and region.

The perspective that each institution brought to the question of community partnerships differed according to its mission and the nature of the region it inhabits.

Franklin & Marshall College is located in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, one of the most fertile and productive agricultural regions

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in the nation. While in recent decades the college's relationship with the local community has been generally good, the city and region are now exhibiting signs of social change. Lancaster County is gradually losing its farm heritage to residential and commercial development. The city has suffered from the emigration of both businesses and families to the suburbs. Over the past two decades, the neighborhoods beyond the campus perimeter have undergone gradual transition as the economic base has declined, and as a smaller proportion of the dwellings becomes owner-occupied. There has been a growing sense of need within the college to devote a more purposeful effort to community partnerships as a component of its long-range strategic plan.

Michigan State University has a long tradition of outreach to the state, the nation, and the world. While historically it has worked through several channels to develop and maintain relationships with the local community of East Lansing, a set of major student disturbances following sports events in 1997 and 1998 made clear the need for more concerted attention to issues of student behavior. The university felt an acute need to combine forces—with the city, neighborhood groups, law enforcement officials, landlords, and local businesses—to address the shared issues of student behavior, better communication with off-campus students, affordable and habitable student housing, and a greater range of entertainment options. If preventing further riots was the immediate goal, the longer-range objective was a more solid and diversified set of partnerships between the university and its many constituencies within the East Lansing community.

Colleges and universities are place-bound: Their futures depend on the social & economic vitality of their regions.

State University of New York (SUNY), College at Geneseo has enjoyed generally positive relationships with the village of Geneseo, where it is located. In developing its strategic vision, however, the college has identified the need to cultivate a more active presence in the Greater Rochester region. In addition to expanding its interaction with educational, corporate, and civic players in the surrounding area, the college seeks to provide students and faculty with more opportunities to engage the challenges facing the region. At the same time, SUNY Geneseo seeks to enhance its own liberal arts programs through expanded opportunities for service and community involvement.

Washington and Jefferson College is located in Washington, Pennsylvania, in an area that once thrived on an economy of coal mining and steel manufacturing. As the viability of the steel industry deteriorated through the 1970s and 1980s, relations between the town and college became increasingly strained. The town's resentment culminated in a lawsuit that sought to eliminate the college's tax-exempt status; this legal battle attracted notoriety as it advanced to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court in 1997. While the state's highest court ultimately ruled in favor of the college's charitable institution status, the process brought college-town relations to a nadir. Trustees, faculty, and many members of the Washington community felt the need for a new beginning toward a more cooperative future.

Elements of Partnership

The Knight Collaborative Engagement on Strategic Community Partnerships provided opportunities for leadership teams from these four institutions to

compare notes, to define principles of community engagement, and to develop action plans and criteria for evaluating success. In developing their individual plans for enhanced community partnerships, these institutions worked together to address a common set of questions:

1. Why should a college or university engage in community partnerships?
2. What principles should guide an institution's partnerships with the community?
3. How can an institution engage its local or regional community as a partner?
4. How can a college or university build internal commitment to the goal of intensified community engagement, particularly among its faculty?
5. How does an institution ensure that initiatives pursued in conjunction with community partners are sustainable?
6. How does an institution know if a partnership is achieving its goals? What are appropriate measures of success?

While cast in the idiom of their particular cultures, the four institutions found remarkable similarity in their responses to these questions.

1. Why community partnerships?

What is the motivation for a college or university to engage in partnerships with its community in the first place? For these four institutions, it was the simple understanding that they are place-bound, with their own futures directly dependent on the social and economic livelihoods of their local regions. "Higher education institutions have an ecological connection to their local communities," says Ira Harkavy, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Community Partnerships. "They can't expect to thrive by holding themselves aloof from the conditions, needs, and opportunities of their neighbors." Richard Kneedler, president of Franklin & Marshall College, observes that, all too often in this age of disparities, colleges and universities are perceived as gated communities for the privileged. "We need philosophically to shift from the conception of the academy as cloister to the academy as a public space directly linked to the life of society," he explains.

Beyond the sense of sharing a common destiny with their regions, these institutions realized that community partnerships offered a means to enrich the education of students by providing increased opportunities for service-based learning as well as faculty research on community-related issues. As such, community partnerships offer a way to redefine the purpose of a broad-based education in the arts and sciences as a foundation for individual commitment and service to society.

Mental shift: from academy as cloister to academy as directly linked to the life of society.

In a roundtable that culminated the Strategic Community Partnership Engagement, several team members observed that higher education had essentially walked away from its obligation to establish moral and civic values among its students through the 1960s and 1970s. The ensuing decades have brought about a steady blurring of focus—to the point where many now ask: What are the core purposes of higher education? "We need to ask ourselves," says Richard Kneedler, "can America be optimally democratic if colleges and universities fail to instill a sense of social responsibility in students?" For these four institutions, a central reason for developing more extensive community partnerships is to move beyond theory toward practice in achieving this dimension of their educational missions.

Exemplars

2. Principles of Partnership

One of the first questions these institutions faced centered on the principles of community engagement itself. What criteria should guide an institution when choosing which partnerships to pursue? Their answers bore the imprint of a common conviction: community engagements must be mission centered. In addition, they should:

- Provide opportunities for the institution to enrich the educational experience of students;
- Encourage faculty and staff to act as models of engaged citizens;
- Create an institution-city community in which all members can feel welcomed, valued, and connected;
- Emerge from a dialogue with both internal and external constituencies;
- Focus on areas of shared concern that offer the prospect of mutual benefit to the community and the institution;
- Direct their energies to areas in which the institution can make a real contribution on the basis of its academic strengths;
- Be affordable, visible, and capable of completion in a timely way; and
- Be amenable to measuring their results.

Ultimately, such partnerships should provide insights on how to fulfill an institutional mission in a changing society. Christopher Dahl, president of SUNY Geneseo, says, "We have to fit community partnerships into an evolving mission that ultimately seeks to expand the conception of a liberal arts degree. Partnerships provide occasions to rethink how the knowledge and skills of a liberal arts education can help students engage more effectively the issues of contemporary society."

3. Engaging the Community

Communication is a staple of any successful partnership. In fact, the experiences of these institutions suggest that one of the first steps in developing stronger community linkages is to establish or expand channels of communication. Institutions need to be attentive to the issues brought forth by members of the community: its residents, neighborhood groups, government agencies, elected officials, K-12 schools, businesses, cultural and civic organizations, media, and private donors.

Dialogue with this range of players may require different venues. Each of the four institutions has established some kind of regular opportunity in which senior officers meet with members of the community on neutral ground for informal conversation. Washington and Jefferson refers to their venue as "Coffee with the College." These sessions allow community members to air their concerns, and they provide opportunities for college or university leaders to model their response to community issues. A prerequisite to successful partnerships is the ability, in J. Herman Blake's phrase, to "listen eloquently," to demonstrate understanding and sensitivity to another's concerns, and to avoid the impulse of supplying definitive "answers" before knowing if anyone has in fact asked the question.

Community partnerships help expand the conception of a liberal arts degree.

One of the most difficult tasks a higher education institution faces is to educate others about the kinds of resources it can bring to bear on issues of shared concern. Rose McManus, a former vice president for housing impact at Fannie Mae, observes that once an organization signals an interest in working constructively with a community,

people will begin to define for themselves what they think that organization brings to the table. "A college or university that pursues this course," she says, "needs both guiding principles and consistent communication to guard against raising expectations that can't be met."

There is also a need to help external constituencies understand that a college or university is not a source of unlimited funds. Raymond Betzner, director of college relations at Franklin & Marshall, says, "Often the biggest obstacle to overcome is the expectation of those who see the college's endowment as a resource. It's hard to make them understand that the endowment isn't necessarily there for the reason they just picked up the phone."

Communication is a central element not just for initiating but for sustaining a partnership with a local community. Patrick Bassette, a principal consultant for the Dewey Square Group, observes that "an investment in communication is a kind of strategic redundancy. The more you can demonstrate that the institution is generating a consistent and responsive message, the greater the trust you can build among external constituencies."

4. Building Internal Commitment

Sooner or later the question arises about the depth of commitment a college or university makes to community partnerships. Does the impetus for such engagements lie with a cluster of individuals, or does the commitment extend more deeply into the culture of the institution? Administrative leadership is key to any successful partnership, but without the involvement of faculty, any engagement will come to seem hollow, to both the community and the institution itself.

A college or university that would develop more active partnerships must address the seeming dilemma between community engagement and a traditional emphasis on academic excellence. Part of the challenge is to foster a different mindset in the academy, one that conceives teaching, research, and service not as separate and competing values but as linked activities in fulfillment of an institutional mission. "Part of the problem," says Donald Straney, assistant to the provost for faculty development and professor of zoology at Michigan State University, "is that these three components of the academic mission have traditionally been presented to faculty as a choice. Given a choice, faculty will make one, and the result in most cases will be a diminishment of service as an institutional value." Many institutions find it difficult to build a culture that avoids pitting the mission of service against scholarship as an "or" proposition, rather than seeing them as activities conjoined by an "and" in a broad mission of teaching, research, and service.

Ira Harkavy stresses the need to involve leading faculty who are well-regarded both in their disciplines and in the institution. "The challenge for a university or college," he says, "is to see community engagement not as a parochial and subsidiary concern but as central to educational and research missions. In many respects community issues are global issues that are manifested locally. An institution must learn not to be apologetic about the intellectual benefits of community partnerships. Very often community involvement can lead to important work that advances both teaching and research."

The initial arguments for convincing faculty to devote part of their energies to community involvement are often much less high-minded than one might imagine. What gets them to the table in the first place is often the experiential as much as the intellectual appeal. There are many ways to stir faculty interest: money, recognition, time, peer pressure, intellectual company, and the sense that the community offers a natural setting to pursue questions that are central to their own academic interests.

Exemplars

Brian Mitchell, president of Washington and Jefferson says, "You can articulate the most elegant vision of institutional involvement in community partnerships. Ultimately, though, you have to sell it on a case-by-case basis. You cannot just say, 'This is what we have to do, boys and girls.'"

5. Sustaining the Effort

"As an institution, what resources are you willing to commit, what changes in the culture are you willing to lead in order to grow a lasting commitment to community partnerships?" This was the question Rose McManus asked the four institutions in the final session of this Engagement. All too often the first stage of institutional initiatives depends on the dedication of a few energetic souls who later burn out or leave, effectively snuffing the life of the project. Often it is the very fickleness of a college or university's previous involvement that creates skepticism and distrust in a local community.

To guard against raising unrealistic expectations: need guiding principles and consistent communication.

"There is a need," says Ira Harkavy, "to develop institutional structures that allow the work to aggregate—structures to demonstrate that the institution can be responsive to the community over a period of time." Gregory P. Shea, a faculty member in Penn's Wharton School and an expert on changing organizational cultures, observes that any institution that would produce different behavior in its employees must create the systems that make the desired behavior seem logical. Important though it is to model the behavior being sought within the organization, Shea says that leadership of this kind is not enough. "If you model behavior without taking steps to build it into the organization, people will view you first as irrelevant and finally as a threat." Shea argues that changing institutional behavior to achieve a strategic goal requires that leaders focus attention on most, if not all, of the following elements: organizational structure, workplace design, task definition, human resources, decision allocation, information distribution, rewards, and measurement.

One strategy an institution can take is to create an administrative position focusing specifically on community partnerships. While recognizing that such a step runs the risk of seeming to let the rest of the campus off the hook, institutions also know that such a position sends an important signal about the sincerity of its commitment. The person to fill such a role must be a broker and facilitator, not just a support person for the cause. It is important that he or she has access to the chief administrative officers, feels comfortable working across different divisions of the institution, and, if at all possible, has a faculty role. Such a person would play a dual advocacy role, both for the institution and the community.

6. Landmarks

How does an institution know that its strategic partnerships with a community are successful? How does one measure and express the progress made over time? Because so many elements of this process derive from the culture of an institution, on the one hand, and that of a local community or region; on the other, the search for national performance benchmarks can prove elusive. The four institutional teams participating in this Engagement found that in many if not most respects, the metrics of success stem directly from the goals they have identified for their particular community partnerships. If one were to generalize the experiences in these four settings,

however, several indicators would become potentially important in gauging the success of such interactions. These indigenous signs might be termed "landmarks" on the horizon of strategic progress:

- A college or university acts on the knowledge that community partnerships entail something more than public relations.
- Through a range of behavior changes, an institution signals its understanding that its current and future vitality depends to a considerable degree on that of the city or region of which it is a part.
- The institution makes community partnerships an integral part of its broader strategic planning process.
- The institution demonstrates the ability to move beyond its own viewpoints in considering issues and ideas within the community itself.
- The administrative leadership plays a strong public role in advancing programs from talk to implementation and motivating the cultural changes necessary to sustain community partnerships.
- The cultivation of partnerships changes the language used to describe the relationships between an institution and its local community.

In the final session of the Strategic Community Partnerships Engagement, each of the four institutional teams reflected on the lessons learned, the insights contributed, as well as the actions taken, partly as a result of the Engagement. A sampling of their future plans and existing projects helps to fill out the contours of what strategic community partnerships can mean in different settings.

Franklin & Marshall's experience stresses the importance of making community partnerships a clear institutional priority, incorporating them as a goal in its strategic plan. As a first step in the development process, it will establish a College-Community Partnership Board, including members of the college and Greater Lancaster communities, to encourage, support, and evaluate partnerships consistent with the college's long-range strategic plan. The college envisions this board having a central role in surveying community needs and priorities and identifying opportunities for effective collaboration. Among the existing projects that focus on partnerships with the community are the Center for Liberal Arts and Society, a program that creates opportunities for students and faculty to make connections between a liberal education and the needs of society. Another is the college's Homebuyers Assistance Program, which helps faculty and staff obtain affordable mortgages to purchase homes in the region extending directly beyond the campus. Another instance of Franklin & Marshall's involvement in its community is College Hill Apartments, a project financed in part by the college to restore a deteriorating but historically significant group of structures in the community and provide options for safe and affordable housing to students. While these apartments are marketed primarily to students, they remain on the city's tax rolls.

Community engagement: central to the educational and research missions.

In the time since the riots, **Michigan State University** has engaged in more intensive community-building with neighborhoods, city government, law enforcement officials, landlords, off-campus students, and others, in part through the recently established Community Relations Coalition. It has broadened the channels of communication among all constituencies in the university and community through such means as the

enhancement of student orientation activities, newsletters, websites, columns in the local newspaper, and dialogues involving students, landlords, the university, and the city. One of the insights derived from Michigan State's experience is the importance of faculty expertise and class-based projects creating new links and new ways of thinking about the relationship between the institution and its community. One sign of progress resulted from the work of an urban planning professor, who assigned both her undergraduate and graduate classes to study the Cedar Village neighborhood of East Lansing, a predominantly rented housing area that is frequently the locus of student disturbances. The policy recommendations of these two classes on "defensible space" were formally submitted to the East Lansing City Council, providing a basis for continued public dialogue about this neighborhood, its problems, and possible solutions. In recognition of the role students have played in reshaping the dialogue between the city and the university, the East Lansing City Council presented the leaders of the student government association with the keys to the city.

SUNY Geneseo's work underscores the importance for a campus to gain a comprehensive knowledge of existing activities between members of the institution and the community, and of identifying "best practices" from these examples to help guide a strategic approach to partnerships. The college has undertaken an analysis of community needs and an inventory of current faculty/staff involvement, seeking to identify opportunities for increased college involvement in the Greater Rochester community. It has approached community leaders in individual and focus group discussions to learn about their perceptions of the community's challenges and the roles the college could play in helping to address those issues. Among its continuing projects in conjunction with the extended Rochester community is the Xerox Center for Multicultural Teacher Education. The Center links the college's liberal arts strengths with a corporate partner to address the shared concern of ensuring that the region's K-12 schools are staffed by high-quality teachers capable of educating youngsters from a range of cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The actions of **Washington and Jefferson College** indicate how an institution can move from a position of defensiveness to proactive engagement with its local community. The college plans to continue to pursue opportunities for constructive dialogue with the community through expanded use of the "Coffee with the College" program, discussions with community leaders, and a more ambitious communications strategy. In addition, as a result of this Engagement, Washington and Jefferson College determined that it will create the administrative position of Community Affairs Officer to provide college-wide leadership both in identifying opportunities for community partnerships and in giving shape and focus to those prospects. Among existing projects undertaken in conjunction with the community is the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, a partnership with three local school districts and the federal government, which receives foundation and private support. The Center's programs bring together faculty from both the college and school districts to improve the quality and consistency of teaching and learning at all levels in the Washington County area. Another is the Downtown Revitalization Project, a city-college partnership that seeks to attract approximately $3 million from the Pennsylvania state capital budget to complete $11 million in state funding for infrastructure improvement along the Main Street Corridor

Need for institutional structures to ensure responsiveness to community over time.

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in Washington, Pennsylvania. The college is also working in conjunction with the state and local government, PONY baseball officials, and private donors to develop an athletic complex for shared usage with the town. In addition to new soccer and lacrosse fields that the college would own, the complex will include a minor league baseball stadium (available for college use) and a museum for PONY baseball.

The Language of Engagement

In the course of their participation in the Strategic Community Partnerships Engagement, these four institutions progressed well beyond the sense of community partnerships as good public relations; each came to see the deeper, substantive benefits both to itself and to its extended community from a systematic commitment. Each came to see partnerships as ways to enhance the vitality of its mission by providing its students with an expanded context for learning and service.

In setting about to develop partnerships with its community, an institution embarks on a course without knowing for certain what the outcome will be. A college or university must entertain the thought that this relationship might yield changes not just in its potential partner but in itself as well. It must be prepared to see itself as both the subject and the object of a verb, to imagine that its own institutional culture might change appreciably as a result of the process.

Part of the anxiety of this journey derives from the difficulty of describing it to oneself and to the rest of the higher education community, which may well consider such strategies to be puzzling and misdirected. No single phrase readily conveys the full extent of the cultural transformation required of an institution that undertakes a more proactive and concerted set of relations with its community. In seeking to describe the change in orientation, the four institutional teams considered several phrases to describe the kinds of institutions they hoped to become:

- "Neighbor"
- "Piece of the puzzle"
- "Common ground"
- "Engaged campus"
- "Cosmopolitan campus"
- "Civic college and university"

Although none of these monikers fully captures the change in orientation, each speaks in some way to the direction in which an institution would likely find itself moving as it works to cultivate partnerships with its community.

Beyond Precept

Will a college or university that cultivates community partnerships provide its students with a stronger learning environment? In many ways, as Ira Harkavy points out, the debate over this question stems from two different conceptions of education advanced by Plato, on the one hand, and John Dewey, on the other: Do people learn best by contemplating matters in the abstract or by actively engaging in the practical application of theoretical principles? Without diminishing the pursuit of knowledge in its ideal forms, these institutions share the conviction that a combination of practical and theoretical knowledge enhances the learning of students. Can a higher education institution expect to teach its students the value of civic engagement if it turns its back on the local community? These institutions have come to affirm that their own answer is, "No." Community partnerships provide an avenue for colleges and universities to teach by example in addition to precept—to convey the value of community and civic participation on the basis not just of what they say but of what they do.

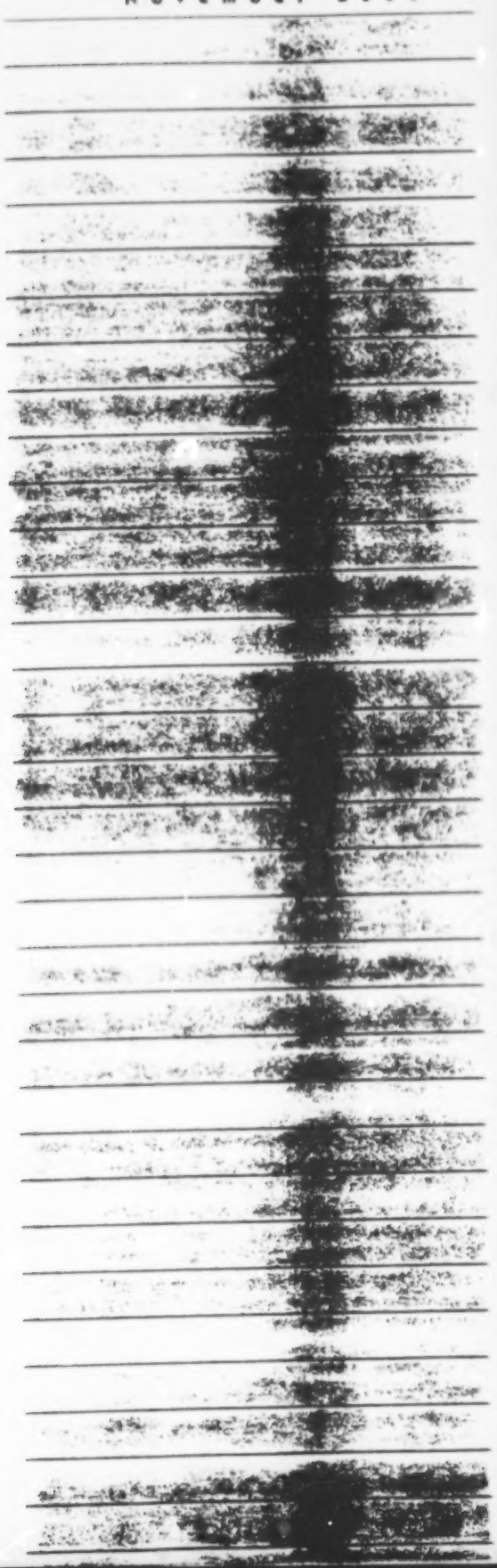
Institutional Profiles

Franklin & Marshall College:
Independent liberal arts college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania
Number of undergraduate students: 1,850
Number of full-time faculty: 161
Number of part-time faculty: 25

Michigan State University:
Public research university in East Lansing, Michigan
Number of undergraduate and graduate students: 43,038
Number of full-time faculty: 2,392
Number of part-time faculty: 222

State University of New York, College at Geneseo:
Public liberal arts college in Geneseo, New York
Number of undergraduate and graduate students: 5,300
Number of full-time faculty: 260
Number of part-time faculty: 85

Washington & Jefferson College:
Independent liberal arts college in Washington, Pennsylvania
Number of undergraduate students: 1,241
Number of full-time faculty: 91
Number of part-time faculty: 19



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Exemplars, a companion to **Policy Perspectives,** features profiles of colleges and universities making significant changes to their institutional cultures. **Exemplars** is supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and is a publication of the Knight Higher Education Collaborative.

Robert Zemsky
Senior Editor

Ann J. Duffield
Program Director, Knight Collaborative
Senior Consultant, Marts & Lundy, Inc.

Gregory R. Wegner
Managing Editor

James F. Gaibally, Jr.
Contributing Editor

Joan S. Girgus
Contributing Editor

William F. Massy
Contributing Editor

The institutional profile for this **Exemplars** was researched and written by Gregory R. Wegner.

Inquiries should be directed to:

Exemplars
Institute for Research on Higher Education
4200 Pine Street, 5A
Philadelphia, PA 19104-4090
Phone: The Education Line, 800-437-9799
E-mail: **pp-requests@irhe.upenn.edu**
Web site: **www.irhe.upenn.edu/knight/knight-main.html**

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